Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 384 pp., ISBN: 9780231540971, £49.95

"[…] we might label the Mughals as more multicultural than multilingual when it came to Sanskrit"

The extent to which India's Mughal dynasty used language, culture and history as tools to establish and legitimise kingship is the central theme of Audrey Truschke's book *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court*. The novelty of her revisionist reading of Mughal history between 1560 and 1660 is that it approaches this history through the use of Sanskrit, rather than the predilection of most histories toward Persian texts and influences. Examining the perception that the Mughals represented benevolent patrons of native "Indian" culture (literature, art and music), Truschke asks essential questions about the reasons for the Mughal court's support of these artistic and cultural practices. Employing a range of textual and visual evidence, including court histories like Ain-i-Akbari, letters and annals of Hindu and Jain figures, this book takes a fresh look at the cultural transactions at the Persianate Mughal court, thus adding to previous scholarship on Hindu-Muslim cultural interactions.[1]

A nuanced introduction lays out the early modern landscape of Mughal India, the proclamation of power by the emperors, and the context of various languages (Turkik, Persian, Braj, Sanskrit, Hindustani) that were in use. It introduces Jain monks and Hindu Brahmans as key interlocutors with the Mughal court, and outlines how these Sanskrit scholars reached the royal court through subsidiary courts and alliances. The Jain influence at court, Truschke argues, can be demonstrated by their ability to shape royal *farmans* (edicts) like the banning of animal slaughter, for example. The Jains and Brahmans not only translated but also composed works in traditional styles for their imperial patrons and were often called upon to partake in theological and philosophical discussions, where they had to defend and explain their religious practice. The book's examination of these discussions are particularly interesting, given that these Jain

[1] In particular see Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

and Brahman scholars encountered issues of religious ideology, conflicting belief systems, and the need for support from the court.

Significantly, Truschke calls into question the nature of reception of Sanskrit texts: the Mughals did not learn Sanskrit, so how did they understand or even read the material they commissioned? The answer, according to her, is in thinking of the Mughals as an *audience* rather than *readers*, who consumed the new literature. Although Sanskrit proficiency was uncommon, their familiarity with Hindi would suffice to get the essence or gist of the text or conversation.

Translating Sanskrit did not begin with the Mughals: the absorption of Indian philosophy and wisdom goes back to the eleventh century polymath Al' Biruni who commented on the corrupted translations of the *Panchatantra* in the Islamic world. The translation bureau set up by Emperor Akbar was indeed very busy, and while texts are extensively discussed, the author also provides concise timelines and tables of projects and interactions to help the reader visualise the intensity and scope of Akbar's project. This book however, is not a linguistic exploration of a translation project, but one that examines Mughal propaganda in its many forms, including the much lauded translation of the epics the Mahabharata (dubbed *Razmnama*, or the Book of War by Akbar) and the Ramayana. Examining these two Sanskrit epics allows the author to highlight the importance of the texts not only in Sanskrit culture, but also the Mughal court, signifying a long-term engagement with the content, the process and nature of translations and the lasting retellings.

The book critically analyses the policies of Emperor Akbar, and later emperors Jehangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. It challenges Akbar's reputation of being a zealous Muslim who put an end to Sanskritic exchanges at the Mughal court, identifying his motivations as political: an attempt to distinguish himself from his brother, Dara Shikuh, an important patron of Sanskrit art and literature. Akbar's historical image and Aurangzeb's reputation for cultural intolerance require, according to Truschke, a closer and more

critical exploration. Furthermore, on the ideas of patronage, she explores the significance of sub-imperial patrons like Abdur Rahim Khan-i-khanan and their contribution to the cultural exchange.

With a short stopover at the Deccan, the book ensures it covers a wide geographic span in the Indian subcontinent, and touches upon interactions beyond the Mughal court. Truschke examines the incorporation of Sanskrit into the larger Persian world, and addresses the points of convergence, appropriation and assimilation of ideas, origin myths, genealogies and historiography, underlining the importance of Sanskrit in the context of the early modern Islamic world.

A part of the *South Asia Across the Disciplines* Series, *Cultures of Encounters* was a decade in the making and the author has incorporated tantalising excerpts that encourage a perusal of primary sources, while adequately building a case for why she sees Sanskrit literature as strong tool of kingship, as well as a cultural curiosity, in the Mugha court, a court always seen as Persianate in its approach.[2] Concentrating on the Mughal Court's largely peaceful relationship with the Jains, and their lasting relationship with the Brahmins, the book does not however address the relationship of the Rajputs with the Mughals and their impact and agency over Sanskrit translations. Nevertheless, Truschke skilfully analyses the politics of the Mughal Empire, uncovering the motivations of their multilingual court, to prove the ways in which Sanskrit knowledge becomes a major legitimising factor for the Mughals. For anyone interested in early modern India this book will be a treat.

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[2] Other works in this series include, for example, Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Walter N. Hakala, *Negotiating Languages: Urdu, Hindi, and the Definition of Modern South Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).